A Single Decision (Take Two)

By: Timewatch (/u/1698214/Timewatch) (https://www.fanfiction.net/pm2/post.php?uid=1698214)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

Rated: Fiction T (https://www.fictionratings.com/) - English - Sci-Fi/Friendship - General Grievous, OC - Chapters: 53 - Words: 542,002 - Reviews: 1,397 (/r/11714223/) - Favs: 1,321 - Follows: 1,431 - Updated: Aug 19, 2022 - Published: Jan 4, 2016 - id: 11714223

Chapter 18

"I still can't believe you talked me into this, Commander," the clone captain said.

"Easy, Rex," Tano told him. "We're cloaked. They can't see us."

"It's almost like coming home," Asajj muttered, looking over the Separatist armada above Raxus. How many times had she seen this sight before? And how little it had changed, but for the battle-damage being repaired on many of the ships. Coming into view was the distinctively marked *Invisible Hand,* which was so devastated that it was being held in an orbital drydock. Huge swathes of the outer hull had been removed, and Asajj could see flickering little lights within as repair crews nursed the wounded beast back to health. She regretted that this was a rescue mission, and wouldn't be able to take Grievous's second flagship out. It'd only be a small revenge for what he did on Dathomir.

"She's not gonna turn on us, is she?" muttered Rex the clone from behind the cockpit.

"She hates Grievous as much as the rest of us," Tano told him. "And you like Master Obi-wan as much as the rest of us, don't you, Ventress?"

"Watch it, kid," Asajj snapped.

"You're not that much older than me!"

"I'm twenty-four," said Asajj. "I'm the oldest one on this ship."

"You sure are, Grandma Ventress," Rex said with a chuckle. Tano giggled too.

Asajj rolled her eyes, and kept the ship headed for *Invisible Hand*.

"So, where's Obi-wan going to be?" asked Tano, as the Separatist flagship began to fill the cockpit's view.

"Prison block, where else?" asked Asajj. "It'll be in front of the hangar, we can dock at one of the maintenance airlocks right..." She trailed off, and realized that her planned point of entry was gone. She could actually see the very corridor she wanted to access, exposed to the vacuum. "Or, it could be totally destroyed. That's fine. Let's try the other side of the ship."

"Incredible," breathed Rex, "it only took minutes for things to start going wrong for her! No wonder we're winning the war."

"Careful, clone," Asajj said, giving the trooper a scathing glare, "it's a long way down to Raxus."

Rex raised his hands, and looked away. "All quiet in the peanut gallery," he said.

"*Peanut* gallery?" asked Tano, with a confounded look on her face.

"I picked it up from some Corellians. Don't ask."

As she predicted, there was a mirror of Asajj's desired airlock on the other side of the ship, untouched by battle damage. Ever so gently, she guided *Banshee* closer to the hull, until they were less than a meter away. She extended the docking ring, and there was a little shake as it secured itself. "See?" Asajj said to her passengers. "No problems. Let's go."

"This is where the fun begins," Tano sighed, clipping her lightsabers to her belt. Rex put his helmet on.

"Locked and loaded," he reported.

Asajj led the way onto *Invisible Hand.*

"Absolutely not!" Corlissi Ludar said. "We do not have the constitutional authority to nationalize any private enterprise!"

"Not even the enterprises of traitors?" Grievous rumbled, from his dais in the Confederate Congress chamber.

"No, General," the serpent said. "If it's not in the constitution, we can't do it."

"The Techno Union motions that we take charge of all assets of the traitors, as a caretaker for the rightful government," Muwat Hatti the Skakoan said, hand over his heart.

"I object!" the Trade Federation delegate, Mik Regrap the Nemoidian exclaimed. She stood up so quickly her ridiculous hat nearly fell off. "The Trade Federation played a direct role in foiling the coup, we should take charge of the assets!"

"Greedy, thieving agents of the galactic elite!" Arcus Cirrus of Jabiim yelled at the both of them. "Of course you want everything for yourselves! But the wealth gained by these treacherous cretins should be returned to the people and planets they stole it from!"

Grievous groaned, and brought a hand to his faceplate. The rancor of Congress had been amusing for the first few sessions he'd forced himself to attend, but now it was wearing on him. "Enough!" he roared, silencing the hall with his electronically boosted voice. "Either rewrite the constitution to allow for nationalization, or find a solution!"

"That's not how it works, General," Ludar said, barely restraining his own frustration. "You can't just *rewrite* a constitution!"

"Why not?" asked Wayne Horthy from the Sujimis sector. That man one of the few Grievous actually liked. He'd been part of the band of five that'd set out to free him from captivity during the coup, along with the Jedi girl aboard his ship, an airheaded Sephi woman, an Umbaran, and a Karkarodon. The burly Human seemed to be in favor of prosecuting the war at any cost, in the name of freedom and democracy. Grievous didn't care for either of those, but they were useful lures for this crowd.

The serpent launched into another lecture of how government and law worked, and Grievous tuned it out completely. He'd let them argue for a bit, before giving them a solution of his own devising. *I can't wait until Aclinde arrives,* thought Grievous. *Then I will* clean house *as boy Eemon put it! How many of this lot will survive that?*

"Your debate bores me," Grievous said, after several minutes of fantasizing about executing some of the more annoying delegates. "If I cannot nationalize them, I will split their assets in half between the Techno Union and Trade Federation."

"Oh, most generous, most generous, sir," Muwat Hatti said, his little Skakoan head bobbing up and down.

"We find this... acceptable," sighed Mik Regrap.

"And you will do exactly what I tell you to do with them," Grievous added on, as his eyes narrowed.

"What?" the Nemoidian woman asked.

"Of course," said the Skakoan.

"Can he do that?" asked the old lady from Agamar. Tyreca Bremack was not a delegate Grievous liked, but she was one he respected. She reminded him of the village priestess, who'd ruled over the children – a young Grievous included – with an iron fist, after their parents had been taken by the huk. She'd gone down fighting the slavers tooth and claw, and cursed them with dark hours and disaster with her dying breath. Grievous had once thought himself an instrument of that curse, chosen by the gods to fulfill what had been written.

"We'll need to vote on it," the serpent told her.

Surprisingly, the vote passed. Grievous would have smiled pleasantly at the Techno Union and Trade Federation representatives if he could have. "Your organizations had better obey me," Grievous told them. "Or the traitors may find themselves with new company as they await their execution."

"I... I will forward this to Viceroy Haako," said Regrap. "It will mean the end of our neutrality in the war."

"And about time, I say!" said Hatti.

"You are with me or against me," Grievous said. He let them consider those words, as he whipped about and stalked out of the chamber, grey and red cloak flowing behind him. Bullying Congress wasn't an easy task. Oftentimes he had to compromise. Grievous was vaguely aware that there was concern of how he acted, but so far he had yet to actually go behind Congress's back, or ignore their decrees. As far as the galaxy knew, civilian rule was prevailing. And it would prevail, until the very moment it inconvenienced him.

"What's the situation, Captain?" Grievous said into his communicator.

"All clear, General," Dofine said in a tired voice. "Nothing is happening, just as nothing has happened for weeks now."

"And the repairs?"

"Sixty-eight percent done. Up from sixty-seven percent last night."

"Good," Grievous said.

"Hold on," Dofine said, sounding more alert. "What do you mean?" the Captain said to someone out of audio range. "Really?"

"Captain..." Grievous growled.

"There was an unplanned cycling of a maintenance airlock," Dofine said. "Three sections forward of the hangar."

"The prison block..." Grievous's eyes widened a little. "Kenobi!"

"General, there's nothing there," Dofine said, sounding confused. "Not on visual, not on scopes, not even on thermal."

Multiple scenarios flashed through Grievous's mind, everything from a cloaked ship to some fool in a spacesuit launching himself on the perfect trajectory to intercept *Invisible Hand*'s orbit. "I am returning!" Grievous said, before switching to his shuttle's channel. "Prepare my ship! We're leaving immediately!"

Finally, something interesting! This day might not be so boring after all.

The Force pulled Obi-wan from his sleep. *I feel a presence I haven't felt since...* his thoughts trailed off, as he tried to put a metaphorical finger on just *who* he was feeling through the Force. They were close, whoever it was.

The brig door slid open, and the Nemoidian officer sat up in surprise. "Who goes-" He cried out as something hit him on the head, and slumped over on his desk.

"I don't see why you didn't just kill him," a raspy but feminine, and familiar, voice said.

"I don't *need* to kill him, he wasn't even armed," an even more familiar girl's voice said.

"We can at least tie him up so he can't raise the alarm," said Jango Fett. Wait, no, Fett was dead, this was one of his clones. Obi-wan couldn't imagine what a clone trooper was doing here. He peered out through the force field over his cell's entrance.

"Ahsoka? Rex?" he asked hoarsely. The orange Togruta wasn't a vision, she was really there, just like the clone. And with them, the raspy-voiced woman, with pale blue eyes and white skin and white hair- "*Asajj?*" When had she grown her hair out?

"Kenobi," Asajj said, with a playful smirk. "This is two you owe me, now!" She punched a button on the brig's control panel, and the force field went down.

"Master Obi-wan!" Ahsoka cried, rushing forward and embracing him. For a few moments, Obi-wan stood still, hardly believing what was happening. He hugged Ahsoka back, but said nothing. There was nothing that needed to be said. They'd both lost a dear friend with Anakin's death, but they still had each other. They felt that through the Force more purely than any words could convey.

"Okay, okay, happy reunion time is over," said Asajj. Rex was collecting binders and extra blaster cartridges from the brig's small arms locker. "You look like starved dog, Kenobi," Asajj remarked. "What have they been feeding you?"

"Nutrient paste and Nemoidian food," Obi-wan said. The former Sith apprentice scowled stuck out her tongue.

"I don't miss that part of working for the Separatists."

"I don't miss your lightsaber pointed at me either," Rex muttered.

"What amazes me is that you managed to get a message to Ventress here," Ahsoka said, as she rummaged through the lockers of the brig.

"Captain Dofine-" Obi-wan paused. The three of them had no idea who he was, he realized. "The captain of the ship had me brought to the bridge, to use a mind trick on another captain pursuing this ship. There was a disagreement over Grievous taking control of the Separatists, apparently?"

"You could say that," Asajj said.

"I was able to get a message off while they were distracted." Obi-wan looked around the brig, somewhat amazed he could stretch his arms out without hitting a wall.

"Where's R2?" asked Ahsoka.

"I... I'm not sure," said Obi-wan. "I'm sure he'll turn up."

"You mentioned him in your message..."

"I have faith in that little droid," Obi-wan said.

"Tano, what are you looking for? We need to get moving," said Asajj, glancing out into the hall. "You can bet they know we're here now."

"I'm trying to find Master Obi-wan's lightsaber," Ahsoka said. "If it's not in here, then it's with Grievous."

"I thought this was a rescue mission?" The playful tone of voice Asajj took suggested she wasn't entirely opposed to going after Grievous while they were here... Obi-wan didn't think that was a good idea. He didn't detect any dark side influence in Asajj at all, and he'd never seen her fight only with light side powers before. Who knew if she'd gotten stronger or not?

"A lightsaber is only a tool," Obi-wan said. "I can make another lightsaber, but I can't make another one of us if someone dies here."

"Exactly my sentiment," Rex said. "I'm no Jedi, or Sith, or, uh... former Sith, I guess, I'm just a clone. And as much as I'd like to take on the clanker-in-chief, I think getting General Kenobi back to the Republic is a bigger win for us."

"You're right," Ahsoka sighed. "Let's get back to the ship."

As they moved through the ship's halls at a near-run, Ahsoka explained how Asajj had a cloaked ship floating a few dozen meters away from the hull. Even if the Separatists sent a vulture droid to investigate the cycled airlock they came through, they wouldn't even find anything to bump into out there. Once they were near, she'd have the ship automatically dock, and they'd make their getaway.

The only problem was that they needed to get back there first. Obi-wan knew that wouldn't be easy, and got his confirmation when the lights suddenly went out. The emergency lights did not come on. "I have a bad feeling about this," he muttered.

"Who's afraid of the dark?" Asajj asked.

"Not me," Rex said, switching on his helmet's spotlights.

"So, was that related to the damage we saw coming in," Ahsoka asked, "or is that them trying to mess with us?"

"It's Grievous, alright," Asajj said. "Fear, surprise, intimidation; he'll be trying to get use to feel all three before ever showing himself."

"I've fought him six times already, you know," said Obi-wan.

Strangely enough, there were no security droids flooding in to stop them. Of course, Ahsoka had to say something about it. "Isn't it weird how there's no droids?" she asked.

"Commander, don't jinx-" Rex began to say, but he stopped when he saw the red photoceptors at the end of the hall. "Commander!" he groaned.

"Sorry," Ahsoka whispered.

The telltale violet flashes of electrostaves flared to life. "Always the coward, Grievous!" Asajj yelled at the droids. They did not answer. Out of the darkness came four magnaguards.

I feel insulted he sent so few, Obi-wan thought, before remembering he didn't have his lightsaber. He raised his fists, and noted how skinny his arms had gotten in captivity.

Esera ate her Nemoidian food in a corner of the mess hall, far away from everyone else. Most of the crew had been giving her the cold shoulder since she'd apparently revealed herself as a Republic sympathizer for daring to mention the war's cost in blood. *Ironic, isn't it,* she thought. No matter where she went, she never fit in. Even the other human on the ship seemed to be ignoring her. He sat in the corner adjacent to her, minding his own business while he ate. Esera kept glancing over to see if was as curious about her as she was about him, but he didn't look up once. *What's he doing here?* she wondered. *How'd he end up on Grievous's ship?*

Another issue on her mind was what to do with the information she'd learned about Grievous's past life. Khagan Qymaen jai Sheelal of Kalee, a vicious and brutal warlord who'd destroyed the invaders on his homeworld, and chased them to their own colonies, slaughtering fighter and civilian alike without mercy. Grievous and Qymaen were not too different from each other. But, Qymaen's war had been against only the huk, or Yamri'i as the rest of the galaxy knew them. He'd never so much as laid a finger on anyone else who didn't strike the first blow. A brutal and remorseless man, but honest and honorable... in his own way.

Her thoughts were interrupted by her communicator going off. Without even answering it, it came to life on its own, a little hologram of the horrible cyborg appearing on her table. "You!" he barked, so loudly that everyone else in the mess hall turned to look at Esera. "There is a situation!"

"A situation?" asked Esera, blinking in confusion.

"Get to the prison block!" demanded Grievous. "I will meet you there!"

That was all he had to say. "Just another day on the job," Esera grumbled, making her way aft through the damaged ship. But something told her there was more going on here than she caught on, so she stopped by her quarters and took her lightsaber with.

The closer she got to the prison block, the more she felt a presence in the Force. *It's Master Kenobi,* Esera realized. And... someone else. Several someones else. A knot of worry formed in her stomach. *This can't be good,* Esera thought. When the lights all went off, she knew it really wasn't good in the slightest. And then, through the turmoil that had become the Force, Esera began to feel something. She wasn't alone down here.

Her communicator beeped again, but this time it was the Captain. "Miss Komara, I see the General has dispatched you already," Dofine said, cool and professional.

"What's the situation, Captain?" asked Esera. She set her communicator to voice only, so she could keep her eyes adjusted to the darkness.

"Goodness, you sound just like him," Dofine sighed. "We have three infiltrators. One clone, two Jedi. They've released Kenobi from the brig."

"Oh," said Esera.

"Is that something you can deal with?"

"I..." Esera could barely stand her ground against Grievous when he only used a single lightsaber against her. How could she fight another Jedi? "I will do what I can," she said, trying to hide her sudden nervousness.

"The General is returning to the ship, but it'll be a few minutes before he can get down there. The magnaguards have already engaged the enemy."

Slowly, Esera began to feel cold. Even through the ship's temperature hadn't gone down, she was shivering, and her heart was racing. *Two Jedi,* she thought. *I can't even take on one!* Maybe, maybe the magnaguards would be helpful, but Esera had never known them to triumph without their master nearby. Weeks ago, she might have tried to convince them to take her back to Coruscant to tell the Council her side of the story, blindly and foolishly thinking they'd listen. Now, Esera found a place to be, a place where she could make a difference. But of course, the Jedi were going to ruin that too! A little flame of anger began to flicker deep within her, a light against the dark fear closing in around her. Esera held onto that flame.

She crept through the dark halls, as silently as she could. The Jedi would know of her approach regardless, but Esera was listening for the crackle of electrostaves. But the first sound of battle she heard was a blaster shot. *That's the clone,* Esera thought. *They're close...* For the moment, Esera withdrew to a side of the hallway, and crouched down, waiting for the enemy to appear.

The flashes of light came not long after, reflecting off the wall ahead of her, from some other hallway. Nearby was the hum of lightsabers, the sputtering electrostaves, and voices. Two those voices, Esera knew, but who were they? One of the lightsabers was green, the other was... yellow? That was interesting.

No, wait, Esera thought, *there's two green lightsabers. Do I know anyone who does that?* Not a single person came to her mind from her days at the temple. No one but a certain Togruta, who had started doing it during the war. Could it be? That voice, those blades, it had to be!

"Ahsoka Tano," Esera muttered. That other voice she knew must have been Master Kenobi, then. Then who was the Jedi with the yellow lightsaber? And why did they have a single clone? Was he an ARC trooper? A commando? *If it's a commando with three Jedi, Grievous better get here fast, or they won't be much left of me!*

Then Esera had a second thought intrude on her mind: *I'm hoping for Grievous of all people to save me. I've really fallen, haven't I?*

No, now wasn't the time to doubt. Esera was a Separatist now. This was her nation, these were her people, Grievous was her leader, whatever else he might have been. If it was her mission to raise him out of barbarity, then she'd have to survive this, or it'd all have been in vain.

The magnaguards suddenly pulled away from their four enemies, activating their own floodlights. Both sides stared each other down, and Esera willed herself to step into the light. Yes, there was Master Kenobi, bedraggled and disheveled, but standing. Ahsoka Tano was with him; the bright-eyed fourteen year old girl Esera had once sparred with was gone, this woman carried herself like a warrior. The clone may have been an ARC trooper, Esera recognized his rank as captain. The fourth face surprised her, though. She had hair now, even shorter than Esera's, but that white skin and those icy eyes were unmistakable; Esera had seen her in the intelligence reports a dozen times. *Asajj Ventress? Here? Rescuing Master Kenobi!?*

"Who are you?" asked Ventress, eyes narrowed and yellow-bladed lightsaber at the ready.

Esera blinked in the bright lights from the clone's helmet, but she didn't have time to answer.

"Esera? Is that you?" Ahsoka said, recognition flashing across her face. "What the hell are doing here?"

"I, uh, was going to ask you the same thing," Esera blurted out, even though it was perfectly obvious what they were doing.

"Esera? Esera Komara?" Master Kenobi squinted at her. "I was at your knighting ceremony a few months ago. Don't tell me you're here to assist with this rescue, too!"

Esera looked at the magnaguards, who had formed a semi-circle with her at the middle. *Thanks, guys,* she thought, unsure if she was being ironic or not. "Yeah, about that..." Ventress and the clone exchanged a glance.

"Interesting choice of clothes," Ahsoka said. Had she really not realized what was happening here?

"My life's in an interesting place right now," said Esera, moving her hand towards her lightsaber. It was going to feel weird, fighting in civilian clothes. She looked like she ought to be in a Raxulon supermarket instead battling Jedi on a warship. *Stop distracting yourself,* Esera thought.

"Alright, enough chit-chat," growled Ventress. "Are you going to attack or not?"

"Attack? Esera's a Jedi!" protested Ahsoka. "She's on our side!"

"Maybe you haven't noticed, Tano, but she's standing with the droids, not us," Ventress said, giving the Togruta an annoyed look.

"I was wondering when you'd bring that up," Esera sighed. "I'm not a Jedi anymore. Your friends on the Council saw to that, Master Kenobi."

Shock was written all over Ahsoka's face, but Kenobi merely seemed troubled by the revelation. "I'm sorry to hear that," he said.

"What?" Ahsoka asked, aghast. "Why? Esera, what happened? You can't seriously be with *them*, can you?" She pointed one of her blades at the magnaguards.

This was it. This was Esera's one chance to save herself in the eyes of the Jedi.

"I did what was right when no one else would," Esera said, trying to swallow the lump in her throat. "I shut down the star destroyer's weapons so they couldn't bombard Shumavar's cities. They would have killed millions of innocent people. And they called me a traitor for it. The Council wouldn't even let me explain my side! They listened to what one of their own told them, and that was it."

Neither Ahsoka nor Kenobi looked like they believed her. "You didn't turn yourself in?" asked Kenobi.

"*Turn myself in?* And get indefinitely detained in some secret prison?" Now Esera couldn't believe what she was hearing! "Do you think I'm stupid? When men like Holt and Aspar can get me expelled based on their lies alone?"

"Come back with us, we'll set everything straight," said Kenobi, holding out a hand to her. For one tiny moment, Esera thought about doing it. But Kenobi ruined the very chance he'd made. "You must trust in the system," he told her.

Trust the system!? That was just the kind of out-of-touch and ignorant statement she'd come to expect from someone on the Jedi Council! "Your system is broken, Master Kenobi. I'm not going back."

A dark glare came across Ahsoka's face. "If she's done nothing wrong, she's got nothing to hide, right? She's made her choice," she said. "She's committed treason and joined the Separatists rather than face judgment for whatever it is she really did!"

"Ahsoka-" Kenobi started, but Esera wasn't having any of it.

"Choice? You think I had a choice?" Esera yelled at the Togruta. "What else could I do? The Republic threw me away, and the only people who didn't treat me like I was walking garbage were these Separatists! Of course I joined them!"

"You betrayed your oath to the Republic because you weren't *treated* well?" Ahsoka narrowed her eyes and sneered. "I can't believe a Jedi could be that selfish."

The fury that awoke in Esera sent a tremor through her body. A fiery, burning rage enveloped her heart. Of all the people in this wretched galaxy, Ahsoka Tano should have understood her position best! She'd been wronged the same as Esera, hunted as a traitor, but at least the Jedi Council had recognized their wrong when it was all over! They hadn't even bothered to hear Esera out! And now this brat *dared* to pass judgment on her?

"I sense the dark side," Kenobi said.

"I knew it," Tano muttered. "You turned! That's why you were really expelled!"

"She might be aiming to become Sidious's new apprentice, now that Dooku is dead," said Ventress.

"We'll take her into custody, then," Tano said.

"Glad I brought these binders," remarked the clone.

No, you don't understand, is what Esera should have said. But Esera had reached a level of anger too deep for words. A hundred sights flashed before her eyes; the insurgents she'd helped hunt down on Brentaal IV, the Jabiimis defending what little they had, the execution of the Umbaran soldiers, the Twi'leks in the camps, the piles of burnt corpses on Parcellus Minor, the screams of the dying on Tarhassan, countless clone lives thrown away again and again, Captain Tuom dead in the snow of Shumavar, her own master-!

You did this, Esera thought, as a muscle twitched in her horror, every crime, every atrocity happening right now across the galaxy was *their* fault. That burning rage was met with the icy chill of hatred, and Esera knew what she had to do. Her old familiar fear licked at the edges of her heart, something deep inside her soul screamed that this wasn't right – but these blind fools had bathed the stars in blood, and for what? To fulfill some oath to a dying, failed state? No, Esera wouldn't have it. They were going to *pay* for what they'd done.

"You look after Master Kenobi, Ventress, Rex and I will deal with the traitor. This won't take long," said Tano.

"Are you sure you can handle her?" asked Ventress.

"I sparred against her a few times at the Temple, she was never that good," said Tano, giving Esera a disdaining look. "I guess you took the easy way to power, didn't you?"

Esera had nothing to say to her. She took up her lightsaber, and the blade flashed on, blazing green to match Tano's own. "*You are not my equal, oh Jedi invader*,"Esera whispered to herself, thinking of the Kaleesh song she'd heard.

Tano flourished her own sabers, and without further ceremony, charged straight at Esera.

She struck hard and fast, without any grace. But Esera was ready for her. She could remember their sparring matches like they were yesterday; every move was familiar, just tinged with a hint of Skywalker's boisterous style. She could feel Tano's intent leaking out from behind her mental shield, shoddy as it was. Every move the brat made, Esera was ready for. The turmoil in the Force had cleared around her, the future was unclouded for the first time in years.

The magnaguards jumped back into action, two pursued Kenobi and Ventress, two stayed to help Esera. The droids dipped in and out of the fight, stabbing and jabbing at Tano, keeping her off-balance. *So, this is what revenge feels like,* Esera thought, as she drove the Togruta further back, relentlessly hammering away at her defense.

Then there was the clone, Rex. He kept his distance and shot at the droid whenever there was an opening, and they both took a few hits. The clone fired on Esera too, and she easily deflected his shots. The clone rushed from one side of the hall to the other, and blasted away at her; Esera easily blocked the laser bolts, deflecting them straight into the chest of one of the magnaguards. It tumbled over, photoceptors going dark. She did a double-take as she realized what she'd done. *Oh.*

"Hah!" the clone crowed in triumph. "Not too clever, are you, traitor?"

"Don't make her angrier!" Tano yelled at him. "She's only this strong because she's using the dark side!"

Sweat was pouring down Esera's face, though, and the rest of her body too. Never before had she fought like this, and it was wearing on her. Her arms ached from the repeated clashes of lightsabers, and her eyes hurt from the flashes of light. Was it the light? *I'm using the dark side,* Esera thought. On some level that bothered her, but it was a vague and cold sense of being bothered, a distant touch felt through anesthesia.

Tano was fast, but she wasn't fast enough. Esera locked her blade inside one of Tano's and swung it outwards, sending the lightsaber flying backwards. She kicked the Togruta backwards, and pinned her against a wall with the Force. Tano writhed and squirmed as the air compressed around her; she dropped her other lightsaber.

Kill her! a voice spoke in Esera's mind. *Kill her! Take your revenge!* All the times that Ahsoka Tano had humiliated her in the ring at the Temple, all the things she'd said today, all the wrongs the Jedi had done her; she deserved to die! *Kill her! Do it!*

"Esera!" Tano gasped. "Stop!"

"Why?" asked Esera, her voice sounding like it came from somewhere far away.

"This isn't you!"

"What am I?" Esera asked her, raising her lightsaber to Tano's throat. "If I'm not a Jedi, what am I?"

"I don't know," breathed Tano, eyeing the green blade only centimeters from her. "I don't know, Esera. But this isn't what your master would have wanted!"

"What do you know about my master?" asked Esera, the very thought of him shaking her grip on the Force.

"I know he trained you to be better than this," said Tano, still squirming under Esera's invisible grip. "Olor Callo would have never taken the easy way out, never!"

Hearing her master's name again cut straight through the fury and anger surrounding Esera. She'd avoided even thinking his name for months. Like a knife through her heart, Esera felt the pain of his loss all over again. That icy hatred melted into pain and grief. The darkness fled away, the Force became submerged in turmoil once more, and all the strength in her but a moment ago vanished. She fell to her knees, and let her lightsaber power off. Ahsoka fell with her.

But in a second, the clone had gunned down the magnaguard as it was distracted, and Ahsoka had called back her lightsabers. Esera raised her defense, but the damage had been done. The Force was clouded, her body was drained, and her thoughts unfocused. Even Ahsoka's manipulation only left a feeling of disbelieving betrayal in her heart. *She really is Skywalker's apprentice,* Esera thought.

The next instant, Esera's lightsaber was knocked away, and it took her hand with it. Esera stared at at the clean ending of her arm, mouth agape. Ahsoka's eyes were wide.

"Oh, wow, I really didn't mean to go that far," she said. But Esera didn't hear, because the pain hit her like a freighter, and she began to scream.

Grievous didn't wait for the shuttle to even touch down, he jumped out of the doors and hit the hangar deck with an echoing thud. A gaggle of Vulture droids stared at him as he sprinted to the nearest door. He tapped his talons against the lift's floor as he waited for it to arrive at his tower. There, he discarded his cloak and took five lightsabers, before riding the turbolift all the way back down.

"With me!" he shouted to his magnaguards, who had been waiting at the shuttle. The four fell in behind him, matching each stride of his that took him meters closer to the interlopers. Grievous's heart was racing; not from exertion, but from excitement. He was fully armed and operational, this time. This would be a real fight!

The dark did not hinder Grievous in the slightest, but he did slow down so that he wouldn't make so much noise. The ship's sensors told him exactly where the invaders were. Grievous had two of his magnaguards take a long detour to get on the other side of the enemy; the other two he sent ahead to spook the Jedi. As for himself, he quietly crept through the darkened halls, listening to the sounds of footsteps on metal deck get closer and closer. His datalink to the droids told him all four of his magnagaurds left on the ship were down. The status of the Jedi girl – the one on his side – was unknown.

Typical, Grievous thought. *Why should I expect anything from anyone but myself?* That's why the Confederacy's head of state was hunting down intruders himself. No one else could be trusted to get the job done.

The two magnaguards he sent ahead made visual contact with the Jedi; they had yet to be noticed. Droids didn't reflect in the Force, and the Jedi's only light was a yellow-bladed lightsaber. That was a rare color; Grievous had no yellow lightsabers in his collection. *A fine addition,* he thought. He nearly had the droids attack, but if only one Jedi was armed... The other was probably Kenobi. Grievous had the droids let the Jedi pass, and then furtively follow them to his position.

When the Jedi were upon him, Grievous stepped out from cover. "Hello there," he said to them.

"Grievous," Kenobi said.

"I was hoping you'd turn up," said the other one. He knew that voice instantly.

"So, you've finally decided to come out of the shadows, Ventress," Grievous said. "Last I saw, you were running away from me on Dathomir, as I destroyed your witches' coven!"

"Don't let him get to you," whispered Kenobi, putting his hand on Ventress's arm. "Getting angry only serves to help him."

She has hair now, Grievous noted. Ventress glared at him through the darkness, white face lit with a golden hue from the blade she held at her side.

"I have something for you, Kenobi," said Grievous. He tossed the fifth lightsaber at him. "I have long awaited the day to best you in battle."

"Thank you," Kenobi said, catching his lightsaber. "I was just thinking I'd have to leave without my weapon. You're very kind, General."

"You won't negotiate your way out of this, Jedi," Grievous said, splitting his arms into four, a lightsaber in each. One by one, he turned them all on, and spun his blades around to face his two foes. Little did they know the magnaguards were only a few meters behind them.

Go for Ventress, he told them over his datalink. *Leave Kenobi to me.*

"We'll take him together," Kenobi told Ventress.

"Right," she said, with a single nod.

Grievous bounded forward, just as his magnaguards attacked Ventress from behind, electrostaves crackling to life. "Oh, you coward!" Ventress seethed, as she broke away from Kenobi to defend herself.

Kenobi didn't have time to say anything, Grievous was already upon him. Fighting Kenobi was always annoying, his style was so passive and defensive that he never left any openings for Grievous to exploit. Lightning-fast speed and four arms didn't matter against a Jedi so in tune with the Force that he could deflect and defuse every attack against him the moment it began.

But this time, something was different. Kenobi had spent almost two months in a cell. He was weakened, physically if not spiritually. With every second, with every blow, Kenobi's defense faltered. He wouldn't be able to keep up with Grievous's strength and speed for much longer. Their eyes met as their blades locked once again.

"Ventress can't save you," Grievous told him.

"She won't need to," said Kenobi.

Grievous snorted, and pulled back for another attack. But as he loomed up, he saw two more blades in the dark. *Ahsoka Tano!* he thought, feeling what little blood he had left boil. The brat sliced down one of the magnaguards from behind, putting the other on the defensive. The two Grievous had sent around the long way were nearing, but the tables had turned. He'd need to be fast.

"Tano?" He laughed at the Jedi master. "You think she's of any use? Pathetic!" Grievous stabbed his sabers in from four different directions at Kenobi, who could only back off to avoid them. But even as he stepped back, Grievous wrapped his talons around his ankle, and sent him crashing to the ground. *Too slow!* thought Grievous, raising his blades for the killing blow.

"Oh no you don't!" shouted Ventress, throwing herself between him and Kenobi. She bowled Grievous over with a blast of Force energy, sending him crashing back down the hall. "Tano! Get over here and help me!"

The two other magnaguards made their appearance, surprising the Jedi from their flank again. Grievous jumped back to his feet, and roared as he charged back into the fray. He was so close to killing Kenobi! Not even Ventress would stop him!

Grievous slammed two of his blades against Ventress's. "Is that all that you've got?" she asked, teeth bared. He didn't bother answering as he stabbed with his other two at her exposed torso. She jumped back, but too late; one of the lightsabers scored a strike straight through her left shoulder.

Kenobi was back on his feet, and Tano was at his side; she pulled Ventress toward her with the Force. And then, Grievous noticed the clone. He had the Jedi girl in tow, binders slapped around her arms. *Idiot!* he thought. How could she have gotten herself captured already? Then he saw her right hand was gone. Their eyes met, and despite her clenched jaw and remaining fist, Grievous could see her shame and pain as clear as day, and tears still rolled down her face.

He'd seen that look before, long ago, in another life. A hurt, lost little girl trying her best to be brave, and failing.

"Rex," said Tano, "get Komara to the ship. Leave without us if you have to."

"Yes, sir," said the clone.

"Ventress, can you still fight?" Tano asked.

"It'll take more than that to keep me down," Ventress said, sneering at Grievous.

I can win this, Grievous thought. *Kenobi is exhausted, Ventress is wounded, Tano is a joke! I can take them all and win!* But if he did... The clone had his Jedi, and was going to leave with her. He'd never be able to track a cloaked ship before it got into hyperspace. Even if he called the Vulture droids out and had them shoot randomly, they'd probably just blow the whole thing up instead of damage it. *No, no, no, don't rationalize it! Finish the job! You have them all right here!*

He looked at the girl, and then to the Jedi, and back to the girl. The Jedi must have known what he was about to do, because they all attacked at once, just as Grievous rushed after the clone. His robotic legs carried him faster than any of them could run, but Tano pushed herself with the Force down the hall on her knees, sliding on the smooth deck. She popped up in front of him, but Grievous swatted her aside.

"I feel almost jealous someone else has his attention for once," Kenobi remarked from somewhere behind him.

"This isn't the time for jokes!" Ventress groaned.

"Enough running!" the clone suddenly yelled. He whipped around, one arm around the Jedi girl's throat, the other pointing his gun at Grievous. But he was only a clone, and by the time he'd squeezed the trigger, Grievous's lightsaber had sliced the tip of the gun off. He punched the clone's helmet and sent the man bouncing into the wall, and the Jedi girl tripped him. Grievous sliced her binders off.

"Come on," Grievous sighed, pushed her behind him. But then, there was a blue flash of light, and she screamed as she fell. The clone had shot her!

And then Grievous was surrounded. His fallen Jedi was at his feet, Tano was behind him, Ventress in front of him, and Kenobi faced the magnaguards following them. Maybe arming the Jedi master was a bad idea after all. Maybe he should have killed him when he could have. Grievous doubted he could take care of his ally *and* defeat the four of them at once.

Suddenly, they all cried out and shielded their eyes as the hallway lights blinked on and blazed brighter than Grievous had ever seen them. "Go, General!"Captain Dofine's voice buzzed in his ear. Grievous didn't need to be told again; he snatched the Jedi girl up like a sack of turnips barreled through his foes, and met his three magnaguards.

All security forces, converge on this location, he ordered to the droids on the ship. *Kill them! Launch all fighters and destroy the cloaked ship!* Unfortunately Grievous's plan was given away as some fool droid on the intercom began to relay his newly-issued orders for all to hear.

"Thank you for your hospitality, General," Kenobi said, with a slight nod.

Grievous didn't see them, though. *That's what they said, when this all began.* In his mind's eye, he was back on Kalee, facing the Chancellor's ambassadors. Then, he had stood tall, pointing at the robed figures in front of him, and delivered his warning: "He who comes to us a guest, comes with no fear. But he who comes to us sword in hand, by the sword shall perish."

When he blinked, Kenobi and Ventress were still here. The would-be Sith tugged on his arm, and they retreated after the clone and Tano. His chance to kill all three evaporated. Grievous growled and stamped his talons into the floor, before kneeling down to see how badly his Jedi was hurt.

"I will be very disappointed if you die now," said Grievous. "I gave up killing Kenobi for you."

"Shut up," the girl said through grit teeth. The blaster bolt had taken her in her left lung, just under her heart. Her breathing was uneven and shallow, and she winced with every exhale. Tears filled her eyes, her whole body shook, and she was soaked with sweat. If he didn't act, she very well could die.

"We are going to the medical bay," Grievous told her, scooping her up in both arms.

"I- I want my hand back," said the girl in a weak voice. "I don't want to- to end up like you."

"Very well." He strode off towards the medbay. "How long did you last against Tano?" asked he.

"I could have killed her," the Jedi girl said, in horror and shame. "I used the dark side." She sobbed once, a weak and quiet noise, and covered her face with her good arm.

Grievous reflected on just how long it'd been since he last had to carry a crying child somewhere.

"What was that about?" Asajj hissed.

"I wish I could tell you," Obi-wan said. His vision was blurred and his mind fuzzy. He could hardly stand straight. But Grievous's parting words to them had been uncharacteristic. Never before had he spoken like that to Obi-wan. Or anyone, as far as he knew.

"Hey Rex, was shooting Komara really necessary?" Ahsoka asked up ahead.

"Was cutting off her hand?" he asked in turn.

"That was an accident!"

That explained that, then. Red alarm lights flashed through the now-bright halls, and a mechanical voice was calling down the entire ship's security on them. Security battle droids began to appear, shooting uselessly at them. They weren't a threat, but they were irritating. At least Rex got a gun to use from one of the fallen droids.

"We don't have time for this," Asajj said.

"R2!" Ahsoka suddenly exclaimed.

"Well, look who finally turned up!" Rex said. "I hope you've got a way out of this, buddy, because I sure don't!"

R2 beeped and booped, incomprehensible to Obi-wan. But he trusted Anakin's droid. R2 had been through worse than this. "I had a feeling you'd show up. If you've got a way, show us," Obi-wan said to the droid. The astromech chirped, and led them down a completely different corridor than Asajj wanted to take. For a few moments, they stopped at a blast door, and heard a heavy *woosh* behind it. When it opened, they found a plethora of repair droids, who completely ignored them as they packed up their heavy equipment.

"This corridor just got re-pressurized, like, right now," Ahsoka realized. "It must not be on the battle droid's system yet."

"As long as it gets us to that airlock, I don't care!" Asajj said.

In less than a minute, R2 had led them back to the airlock where they had come in. Only a few battle droids were there, and Rex shot them all before Ahsoka could even get close.

"That was some rescue," Obi-wan told them, with a tired smile.

"Thank us later, we still have to get out of orbit," said Asajj, pushing him into the ship. Squeezing four people and an astromech droid into Asajj's ship proved to be nearly impossible, but very necessary.

Through the haze of painkillers, Esera became aware that she wasn't alone. Something was poking the fingers on her right hand, though she could not feel it. "It will take time for you to regain use of this hand," the medical droid spoke. "I cannot promise you that you will ever regain full use, due to the nature of the wound, and your recent illness and malnourishment."

"Bah!" Grievous growled, from the other side of the medical bay bed. "What good is she to me if she can't fight?"

"It is not within my programming to answer that, sir," said the droid.

The terrible cyborg lurked just on the edge of her vision, wrapped up in his grey cloak, hunched over like a curious bird of prey. Esera still couldn't believe he'd gone after her. "Why?" she asked, barely able to hear her own voice.

"Why what?" asked Grievous.

"Why'd... why'd you come after me?"

Grievous tilted his head, eyes narrowed at her. "You've sat in on my strategy meetings," he said. "I cannot let you fall back into the Republic's hands."

You're lying, Esera thought. *I can feel it.*

But Grievous had something else to say. He leaned down, and brought his mask close to her ear. "Never use the dark side again," he said, vocoder as low as it could go. "I know dark siders. Sidious, Dooku, Maul, Ventress, and the rest of those pitiable acolytes... I have no need for selfish servants dedicated only to themselves. You have a sense of conviction and morality they never did. Do not throw that away for mere power."

Esera could hardly believe those words were coming from the galaxy's most notorious Jedi-hunter. For a few moments, he'd sounded more like her master than Grievous. "I won't," Esera whispered, her eyes tearing up again as she felt a pain in her heart no medicine could numb. "I won't."

"Good." Grievous pulled himself back. "When that bacta patch is off, come see me."

"Okay," said Esera. She tried to sink deeper into the bed, feeling cold and alone.

Author's note: Another punished Esera ending, real creative, Timewatch. I'm going to end this chapter with another apology for my clunky fight-scene writing. You all know that my strength is long conversations about politics, strategy, and economics at conference tables with ridiculous sheens, but sadly, I'm not *actually* writing Legend of the Galactic Heroes: Star Wars edition.

Wait, I've got more to say. So, this is the last pre-completed chapter I have. God willing I'll knock out a few more during this break, but securing graduation is going to be priority, and I'll have a lot on my plate this spring term. Chapter 19 on April 15th will be the last update that I can promise will be on time.

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